



*Charles Carleton Coffin*

On February 17, 1865, Charles Carleton Coffin, a war correspondent for the *Boston Daily Journal*, traveled to Charleston to record the surrender of the city and the raising of the Stars and Stripes over Fort Sumter. Curious about the inner workings of the slave trade, and acutely aware of the interests of his Northern readers, Coffin and other journalists traveled to the State and Chalmers streets, heart of the slave-trading district. In a dispatch dated February 24, 1865, Coffin told his readers that the slave traders were not to be found in an “out-of-the-way” place.

The brokers in flesh and blood took great care to be well buttressed. They set up their market in a respectable quarter, with St. Michael’s and the guard-house, the Registry of Deeds and the Sunday-School Depository, the Court-House and the Theological Library around them to make their calling respectable.

Amid these surroundings was the Slave-Mart, - a building with a large iron gate in front, above which, in large gilt letters, was the word MART.

The outer iron gate opened into a hall about sixty feet long by twenty broad, flanked on one side by a long table running the entire length of the hall, and on the other by benches. At the farther end a door, opening through a brick wall, gave entrance to a yard. The door was locked. I tried my boot-heel, but it would not yield. I called a freedman to my aid. Unitedly we took up a great stone, and gave a blow. Another, and the door of the Bastile went into splinters. Across the yard was a four-story brick building, with grated windows and iron doors, - a prison. The yard was walled by high buildings. He who entered there left all hope behind. A small room adjoining the hall was the place where women were subjected to the lascivious gaze of brutal men. There were the steps, up which thousands of men, women, and children and walked to their places on the table, to be knocked off to the highest bidder.

In front was a gilt star. I climbed the post and wrenched it from its spike to secure it as a trophy. A freedman took down the gilt letters for me, and knocked off the great lock from the outer gate and the smaller lock from the inner door. The key of the French Bastile hangs at Mount Vernon; and as relics of the American prison-house then being broken up, I secured these.

Entering the brokers' offices, - prisons rather, - we walked along the grated corridors, looked into the rooms where the slaves had been kept. In the cellar was the dungeon for the refractory, - bolts and staples in the floors, manacles for the hands and feet, chains to make all sure. There had evidently been a sudden evacuation of the premises. Books, letters, bills of sale, were lying on the floor ...